



# Amishav USA

**Helping Lost Jewish Communities Return**

1211 Ballard Street, Silver Spring, MD 20910

Telephone and FAX: (301) 681-5679

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## **What Is Amishav?**

Amishav is an organization dedicated to finding lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people and to assisting those who wish to rejoin the Jewish community.

During the course of our history, large segments of the Jewish community were "lost" as a result of war, exile and forced conversions. The greater part of the Jewish people were "lost" in the eighth century B.C.E., when the ten northern Israelite tribes were conquered by Assyria and the captives were forcibly resettled. Today, these groups can be found in India, Burma, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China.

Another large group of Jews was "lost" during the period of forced conversions to Christianity in Spain and Portugal in the 15th century. Many of these so-called "Marranos" continued to practice Judaism in secret. Their descendants can be found in Brazil, Mexico, the southwestern United States, and Majorca, as well as Spain and Portugal.

Under the directorship of its founder, Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, Amishav has, for the last 29 years, undertaken a variety of activities worldwide on behalf of these dispersed groups, including research, contacts, education, financial assistance, conversion when requested and relocation to Israel if desired.

Amishav USA was formed as a tax-exempt charitable organization to assist Rabbi Avichail's work.

## **Discovering Brazilian Marranos**

*By Jacques Cukierkorn*

Even though Natal, the capital of the Northeastern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Norte, is not one of the main Jewish centers in Brazil, it has become the site of one of the most fascinating phenomena of Judaism in our times. After practicing Judaism in a hidden way for almost four centuries, some families of Marrano descent are shedding their Christian identity and returning to the faith of their Jewish ancestors.

Currently there are in Natal 12 Marrano families that, together with five newly arrived Jewish families, comprise the whole local Jewish population. They have joined in an effort to reorganize the extinct "Centro Israelita do Rio Grande do Norte" that closed its doors in 1967 due to lack of members.

The return of Marrano descendants to Judaism is not a new phenomenon, nor is it exclusive to Natal. Something similar happened in Portugal in the 1920's. The uniqueness of the Natal phenomenon lies in the fact that these people are willing to return to Judaism as a group, and that they have created a havurah or synagogue for this purpose.

I had the opportunity to visit with the Jewish/Marrano community of Natal in August of 1992 and in July of 1993. On both occasions, I went to Natal to do research for my Masters thesis, required for rabbinical ordination at the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio. I myself am Brazilian, a native of Sao Paulo.

*(cont., p. 2)*



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## Marranos of Brazil

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During my 1992 visit to Rio Grande do Norte, I also visited some of the interior parts of the state since I had heard that I might find many people of Marrano descent in those areas. In Chapada do Apodi and Sero do Seride, around 70 percent of the white population is of Marrano origin. ***I encountered several groups that still follow Marrano practices that resemble Jewish ones, such as abstaining from pork and shellfish; not kneeling in church; burying their dead in shrouds and mourning for them for seven days; cleaning the house and lighting candles on Friday night; leaving a stone on tombstones when visiting the cemetery; and fasting on the tenth day after the new moon of September.***

After visiting the interior, I stayed in Natal, the capital, and had contact with the local Marrano community that expressed a great desire to study and learn more about their ancestors' faith. Even though they had been receiving books and educational material from the Jewish community of Sao Paulo, the country's largest Jewish center, they wanted to learn more; their thirst for Jewish knowledge was not being quenched. Motivated by the desire to help in this endeavor, I returned to Natal in July of 1993.

I was able to get the Marc Rich Foundation's financial sponsorship for my educational mission to the Natal Marranos, which made it possible for me to serve as the "rabbi" of Natal for three weeks. During that period we celebrated Kabbalat Shabbat in the primitive shack that

houses the Centro Israelita do Rio Grande do Norte and I gave several classes and lectures.

***I interviewed every member of the Marrano community of Natal, trying to better understand their motivations for wanting to return to Judaism.*** Most of them were very serious about returning to Judaism, and some even expressed the desire to move to Israel. On my last Shabbat in Natal I conducted a day-long seminar that was open to the whole community -- Jewish, Marrano and Gentile. That seminar, which received coverage by the local press, dealt with the basic concepts of the Jewish life cycle and the Jewish holidays. It included prayers, a kosher meal at lunch time, and prayers and havdala at the end of the day.

To my great surprise, I was told that there are other Marrano groups in the Brazilian Northeast. I had contact with Marrano groups from the states which are right above and below Rio Grande do Norte, Ceara and Paraiba -- with dozens of individuals who were interested in learning more about Judaism. The group in Paraiba was so excited about my presence in Natal that they sent their leader to have an interview with me.

***Of the total Brazilian population of nearly 150 million, around 10 percent are of Marrano origin.*** Given this reality, there is a real possibility that new individuals and groups will appear who are willing to recover their Jewish ancestral heritage and identity. ***It is crucial that the Jewish community support the Marranos in the recouping of this heritage and identity.*** I hope that my research in the Brazilian Northeast will be but the first of many such efforts.

## Amishav's Acting Officers

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Newsletter Editor	Karen Primack

## Amishav USA Expands North and South!

A **South Florida** chapter of Amishav USA will be organized this winter. If you know of a Floridian who might be interested, please send the name, address and telephone number to:

Mrs. Stella Giskin  
328 Durham J, Century Village  
Deerfield Beach, FL 33442

Names of potential Amishav supporters who live in the **New York/New Jersey** area should be sent to:

Barbara Shair  
PO Box 78  
Pomona, NY 10970-0078

## Books Available

Our stock of Rabbi Avichail's 176-page English-language book ***The Tribes of Israel: The Lost and the Dispersed*** is low. We have enough to lend out a few. Hopefully, our stock will be replenished soon. The price is \$40 (\$34 of which is tax-deductible). Call 301-585-5229 to borrow a copy or to check on availability for purchase.

## Certificates Available

Attractive 8"x11" color certificates are now available from Amishav to honor special occasions (birthdays, anniversaries, bar or bat mitzvahs) or in memory of a friend or relative. If you would like us to send a certificate, please fill out the form below and send with a minimum \$18 donation (made out to Amishav USA) to Jeri Lande, 1211 Ballard Street, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Recipient's name \_\_\_\_\_

Recipient's address \_\_\_\_\_

In honor of \_\_\_\_\_ OR

In memory of \_\_\_\_\_

### Message from Rabbi Avichail


My Dear Friends in the USA:

Greetings from my little office in Israel! Since our last newsletter, I have been in Brazil, lecturing and attending meetings. In Sao Paulo we met with rabbis and with the "Shma Ami" association in order to find ways to help the descendants of Marranos. In Natal, I lectured before a mixed group of Marranos and Jews; I promised the assistance of Amishav to those who intend to lead full Jewish lives.

**The importance of our visit in Brazil was the contacts we made in Sao Paulo and the cooperation and agreements which we came to with Shma Ami in regard to helping the descendants of the Marranos there (estimated to be some 3 million people).** Shma Ami is run by a young man, a Marrano descendant himself, and a totally committed Jew today. The arrangement we came to with this organization was according to Amishav's policy and conditions. Preparation for conversions to Judaism will be made in Brazil, and we will arrange the actual conversions and aliyah through our contacts in the USA. We intend to send a suitable person to Brazil to assist in this project if we can raise \$10,000 a year as a budget.

And now an update on the Shinlung in Israel: The 41 Tribe of Menashe immigrants from India who arrived in Israel last August have been moved to Midreshet Hadarom. This has turned out to be a very positive location, and I am pleased with this arrangement. The Bnei Menashe work in agriculture in the mornings and spend their afternoons in intensive study, rediscovering their Jewish roots. **Obviously, their work does not begin to cover the cost of teaching and sustaining them. The rent on their rooms comes to \$20,000 a year; clothing and footwear will cost \$200 per person; equipment for classrooms costs \$4000; and so on!**

These people, who for hundreds of years were denied their roots, have come home to their homeland. We would love to bring you here to meet our newly discovered brethren and to see what is being done for



## Amishav, USA


*Helping Lost Jewish Communities Return*

Gratefully acknowledges a  
generous gift from

Donor's name

in honor of

Recipient's name



Amishav is a charitable organization dedicated to finding people with potential Jewish ancestry throughout the world and helping them return to Judaism.

Model of 8" x 11" color certificate available from Amishav

them, and what they are doing for themselves. They are not sitting around, waiting for a handout. They work. If you are planning a trip to Israel, please contact me, and I will arrange for you to meet your cousins, these impressive immigrants.

We are confident that you in the Diaspora will want to be active partners in the absorption of Bnei Menashe.

Yours truly,  
Eliyahu Avichail



## Report from Mexico

By Richard A. Kulick

*(excerpted from a monograph available from the author)*

On a trip to Mexico last August, I found a fascinating and vibrant Jewish presence both extant and in the process of formation. I went as a representative of both Amishav and the DC Latin America Network of B'nai B'rith.

Mexico's total Jewish population is currently about 50,000, of whom some 70 percent are Ashkenazi, 25 percent Sephardi, and 4 to 5 percent converts. Of the converts, about 10 percent are of Marrano ancestry and 90 percent are indigenous Mexicans formerly Catholic or Protestant. Although 90 percent of Mexico's Jews live in Mexico City, there are small communities scattered around the country.

Mexican Jewish history commenced with the arrival of a group of Sephardi Jews from Syria in 1912, beginning a wave of immigration which brought about 25,000 Jews to the country by 1940; the majority Ashkenazi community had begun arriving after 1920.

There is only one rabbi in Mexico who currently accepts converts. Rabbi Samuel Lehrer, an Israeli-born rabbi ordained by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook in Jerusalem in 1935, heads a Conservative bilingual (English/Spanish) congregation. He has converted some 2000 Mexicans to Judaism, mostly members of rural indigenous communities in Venta Prieta, Puebla, Jalapa, Veracruz and a havurah in Mexico City, and these congregations practice Judaism faithfully. About 20 percent of Rabbi Lehrer's converts have made aliyah to Israel.

Small communities of Jewish converts (indigenous Mexicans and Marranos) in Veracruz and Jalapa already

have a relationship with Amishav. Although Rabbi Lehrer originally converted these groups (about 50 families) under Conservative auspices, some of their leadership wished to undergo Orthodox conversion. Some members of the Orthodox community referred them to Rabbi Avichail, who came to Veracruz and Jalapa in 1991 and converted them again. Thereafter, about 70 percent of the 100 or so members of the Veracruz synagogue made aliyah to Israel.

The communities in Veracruz and Jalapa are continuing to hold weekly services in members' homes (in Jalapa) or maintain the synagogue building (in Veracruz). The Jalapa group is sorely in need of a sefer torah scroll, and a group of indigenous Mexican and Marrano converts in Mexico City is in need of siddurim (in Spanish and Hebrew), tzitzit, kipot, tefillin, a sefer torah and other worship objects. In addition, as Rabbi Lehrer is in his late 70's, we strongly feel that the 700 or so Jews in indigenous communities deserve additional rabbinic leadership.

I have found the effort made by myself and others to secure mainstream assistance for these groups disappointing. One organization's response was: "We don't need any more poor Jews, we have enough work to do with REAL ones!" Accordingly, Amishav is establishing a Mexico Mitzvah Fund to assist these communities. Contributions to Amishav should specify the "Mexico Mitzvah Fund."

I would like very much to hear from individuals interested in learning more about these groups and from individuals interested in finding out precisely what they can do to help. I can be reached at 3025 Ontario Road, NW #309, Washington, DC 20009, (202) 328-0876.



Rabbi Lehrer officiates at a group conversion in Jalapa.

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### A NEW FRIEND

The following letter dated November 3 was received by Barbara Shair at Amishav's New York office:

*Dear Barbara:*

*While my area of primary concern is the American landscape, I am most sympathetic with your own efforts and of course I wish you well. If there is anything at all that I can do to help you, please let me know.*

*With warm regards, I am  
Sincerely,  
Alexander M. Schindler*

# Why I Joined Amishav USA

By Lawrence J. Epstein

One of the characteristics of a really successful and important Jewish organization is that it be able to draw a variety of people to do important work. It is hard to imagine more important work than reviving Judaism among those who have been lost to the Jewish people.

This important task brings people together with very different motivations. I know that some people who join Amishav USA do so because of demographic reasons. They see increasing numbers of Jews, especially in Israel, as valuable because the more Jews there are, the more secure is the Jewish future. Others join because of religious reasons; they see the return of people who may have been Jews at one time as the dawn of redemption. Still others participate because Amishav is engaged in a vast humanitarian rescue mission. Some members believe the stories of those rescued are inspirational and, because they are, will influence Jews to have a deeper attachment to their heritage.

I think all of these are excellent reasons, and I find some value in all of them. ***I know that the pluralism of reasons for joining strengthens an organization, and I find the various reasons why people become interested very fascinating.*** In this article, though, I would like to focus on one more reason, maybe an idiosyncratic one, but nevertheless the principal reason for my interest in Amishav USA.

I have a long-standing interest in the general subject of conversion to Judaism. I have written an academic book on the subject, a curriculum for Jewish schools, a bibliographical and encyclopedia article, and many other articles on the subject. Next year I will publish a guidebook for converts to Judaism, and I just signed a contract to edit a book on the subject.

At first, my interest in conversion was practical. I saw it as a way to increase the number of Jews and decrease the number of intermarriages.

I also had a personal reason. I had been raised in a very secular home with only a little Jewish upbringing. My knowledge of and attachment to Judaism were very weak. ***When, in my early 20's, I rediscovered my Jewish heritage, I felt very much like what a convert must feel like. Therefore, I feel an emotional kinship with those who voluntarily choose to become Jewish.***

When I read that Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail was going around the world finding people he thought might be connected to the Ten Lost Tribes, who wanted to practice Judaism, I was intrigued by the exotic nature of the subject, although I maintained a healthy skepticism about all such claims. As I learned more about Amishav's work, I discovered that Rabbi Avichail was not just conferring renewed Jewish status on these people, but was helping many come to Israel to undergo formal conversion.

This was very important to me. When one undergoes conversion to Judaism, the actual fact that he is a descendant of the Ten Lost Tribes becomes less important than the fact that he wishes to become Jewish and live his life out building up the sacred land of Israel.

Such efforts to help people become Jewish are exactly what my reading had led me to define as part of the Jewish covenantal obligation. My interest in conversion to Judaism, in seeing the active welcoming of people who voluntarily wish to become Jewish as a divinely-inspired Jewish mission to be a light unto the nations, is being played out in real life by Amishav. I knew that I had to get involved.

My guess is that not very many people have joined Amishav for a reason similar to mine. Perhaps, not many people even agree with the conclusions I have drawn. But I think such differences are enriching. ***I hope other members of Amishav USA will write in to explain their own reasons for joining.*** Readers who have questions or are interested in discussing my views can contact me c/o English Department, Suffolk Community College, 533 College Road, Selden, NY 11784.

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## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

☐ I/We would like to become a Member of AMISHAV USA, 1211 Ballard St., Silver Spring, MD 20910

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone(s): (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ day (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ evening

Interests and affiliations useful to Amishav's work \_\_\_\_\_

☐ \$18 Member   ☐ \$36 Supporting Member   ☐ \$100 Sustaining Member   ☐ \$200 Contributing Member   ☐ Other

\$\_\_\_\_\_ for Choose-A-Mitzvah project: \_\_\_\_\_

## From the Editor

## WHY GIVE? ONE PERSON'S REASON

I've been donating some time to Amishav USA since its inception, but two events in my life in October helped me focus on why I should support the organization financially as well.

First, I read my August 1993 issue of *Moment Magazine*, which had as its cover story and theme "Jews in Cults". While I had read much about cults before, some of the information was new to me. I learned from Arnold Markowitz's article that three-quarters of those who join cults are relatively balanced, successful people from upper-middle income, intact and educated families. The author suggested three reasons for the disproportionate number of Jews in cults or cult-like groups: They are open to alternative political and theological ideas, they attend college or university (where cults recruit most energetically), and Jewish families are sometimes too close and don't allow for appropriate separation. Committed Jews are not immune. The article by David and Livia Bardin gives a moving account of their son's involvement in a destructive cult -- even though he had graduated from Jewish day schools and young adult programs, spoke Hebrew, lived in Israel as a boy, and returned twice as a youth. The magazine noted that the average cost to deprogram a former cult member ranges from \$18,000 to \$30,000.

The very next day I encountered a long-time acquaintance at the supermarket. We had not seen

each other in several years and quickly got caught up. Our sons had gone to high school together, and I knew that their family was fundamentalist Christian and that their son had been pulled out of biology class when the topic of evolution was discussed. I now learned that their daughter teaches second graders in "a messianic school for Jews" in the Washington area.

That night my husband and I wrote out a check for \$600 to Amishav USA to cover the cost of transporting a Shinlung immigrant from India to Israel. I began to feel much better!

Yes, we all know we are losing Jews to intermarriage, to cults, to other religions, to indifference. I agree with many that education is a vital tool in turning around this situation. Unlike some, however, I do not place my focus on replacing lost numbers; quality is more important than quantity to me. What I have come to appreciate, though, is the irony that allows many Jews to wring their hands in despair over the intermarriage rate and yet to ignore the plight of our cousins, shown by impressive scholarship to be from the Ten Lost Tribes, who have maintained their identity through 27 centuries of hardship. Many are practicing Jews eager to study further in Israel, and some to relocate there. They deserve at least as much attention -- and financial support -- as those who are *leaving* Judaism.

Don't you agree?

K.P.

## Choose-A-Mitzvah

Here's what your tax-deductible contribution to "Amishav USA" can buy:

\$ 5,000	Trip to Pakistan for Pathan contact and research
\$ 1,400	Portuguese printing of book <i>Judaism</i>
<b>\$ 600</b>	<b>Transportation of a Shinlung person from Northern India to Israel</b>
\$ 200	Work clothes and other immediate needs of a Shinlung immigrant
\$ 55	Siddurur and Chumash for a Shinlung in Israel or India
\$ 10	A Portuguese copy of <i>Judaism</i> for a Portuguese or Brazilian Marrano

Deadline for the next issue: February 15, 1994

Karen Primack, editor



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